

# THE STROKE OF MIDNIGHT.

## CHRISTMAS TALE,

BY  
**JOSEPH A. ALTSHELER.**

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The battle roared to and fro in the darkness and the whirling snow; tiny blue flames, nearly smothered by the night and the melting flakes, shot up from the half-burned houses, flickered awhile and then went out to be succeeded by others as feeble; rifle shots rattled in irregular volleys, and the smoke from the gun muzzles increased the obscurity which was scarcely broken by the flashes from the weapons and the faint light of the smoldering timbers.

The wind with an edge of ice whirled here and there and impartially drove gusts of snow into the faces of the combatants, but could not dim their rage. Passion and courage were equal in each, and though the main battle had passed on their own little corner of the struggle was as important to them as the fate of great armies, and neither would yield the ground which had already become where they fought a slippery mire of red mud and snow.

Fleming, the first lieutenant, was shouting to his men and gesticulating with his sword, broken at the point by a rifle ball, though he had never noticed it. The big flakes struck in his eyes and blinded him at times, but he fought on, encouraging his soldiers, struggling through the mire, and watching the combat as best he could



THEN THE WILD RUSH CARRIED HIS LITTLE BAND UPON THE ENEMY.

by the feeble light of the burned buildings. The difficulties of the battlefield, the snow, the darkness, the fierce resistance of the enemy, his inability to drive them back, filled him with the unreasonable rage of youth. A man who despised oaths he began to use through rapidity and unctious and was unconscious of doing so. But his soldiers needed no spur from their commander. Evans, the second lieutenant, a year younger than himself—Fleming had reached the honorable age of 20—was by his side, firing with his pistols at the flying black forms that opposed them, and around the two lieutenants fought a little band of splashed and begrimed men with a courage and energy equal to those of their leaders.

A wall of a house fell on a bed of live coals and the timbers blazed up with sudden vividness, cutting through the darkness and casting a distorted light over the snow, the ruined village and the fighting men.

Fleming paused for a moment to grasp his field of battle by the new light that had come. The flames magnified some objects, diminished others, and made the whole unreal and fantastic. The forms of his enemies wavered as the flames flickered and grew to gigantic size, the bloody spots on the snow spread and united, and the scorched rafters of an abandoned house made an ugly black tracery in the sky. In the momentary stillness that had come upon them all Fleming heard the sputtering of the snowflakes as they fell in the flames.

Being able now to see his battlefield, the lieutenant knew that the little church which stood somewhat to his right was his key, and, shouting to his men to follow, he rushed forward that he might seize it at once and cut off his enemy.

The soldiers fired a volley and dashed toward the church, but the leader of the hostile band was as quick of eye and as ready of action as Fleming, and when the lieutenant and his men entered one door of the church their antagonists dashed in at the other.

Fleming's wrath flamed to its highest pitch. It seemed a personal injustice to himself that his foe should be so stubborn and so prompt, and his resolve to overcome him grew with his anger. He stopped just inside the door, and his men gathered around him. The room was dim, but Fleming saw the outlines of the benches and at the far end the pulpit. The building, until then outside the line of battle, seemed to have been untouched. The light from the blazing house flared in at the window and fell across the faces of his enemies, who were entering at the farther door. Neither side gave a thought to the character of the place, but both knew that a fierce struggle was sure to follow for the possession of so strong a fort as a brick building, and they prepared at once for the issue. Three or four of the heavy wooden benches, which served as pews, were hastily thrown together, made a good breastwork, and standing behind it Fleming and his men waited to see what the enemy would do.

The hostile leader waited, too, perhaps with the same purpose, and again the building was silent. The fallen wall was burning finely and the light from it now shone through the window with a steady radiance and drove a dusk from the room.

that they must rush the rebels, and Fleming, nodding his head, gave a quick command to the men, who leaped over the hasty fortification that they no longer desired and rushed upon their enemies, the lieutenants, as always, at their head.

Fleming knew that it was a bold plan allied to rashness, but he trusted that success would come from his suddenness and that he would be upon his antagonists before they could recover from their surprise and shoot down his men. A few swift steps took him across the room. He was filled with a fierce exultation, for he believed that he was about to triumph, but even in the wild rush of the moment and with a mind concentrated upon the impending struggle, he observed the room again, the rows of wooden benches, the light, the pulpit at the far end, and the doorway that led to the second floor, and the light through the window flaring redly over everything. Then the wild rush carried his little band upon the enemy, and, as he had hoped, the surprise of the sudden movement made its success.

A few scattering shots were sent flying toward the benches and then they were over the benches and in the midst of the triumphant combat. Fleming was burning with the battle fever, and again he began to shout to his men and utter oaths of which he was unconscious, striking with his sword and calling at times upon his antagonists to yield.

He found that he was opposed by soldiers as valiant as his own. Beaten by numbers, those who were not wounded or taken by force refused to surrender, and wheeled about as if by a sign from their leader rushed up the stairway, which he had almost at their feet and sought refuge, and a second defense on the next floor.

Disappointment now mingled with Fleming's anger, but neither emotion caused him to forget for the moment his military prudence. Hastily dispatching a few of his men to keep watch at the windows outside and escape there, he sprang up the stairway with the others in quick pursuit of the fugitives. Rage and excitement blinded him to the danger of shots from above, and Evans, as eager as himself, pressed on by his side, while the men crowded close after, the wooden stairway giving a dull echo under their footsteps.

The light from the flames of the burning village did not reach the second floor, and Fleming stood for a moment or two trying to accustom his eyes to the dusk. As the pupils dilated he saw the last of the fugitives disappearing in a small room, and then he heard the slamming of the door and noises which indicated preparations for defense. A little gray-haired man in civilian's attire and with a face of fright sprang from a dark corner where he had been crouching and darted to a window, at which he pulled vainly with trembling fingers as if he would open it and spring out.

Fleming looked quickly about that he might seize the salient points of this last battlefield. He paid no attention to the civilian, supposing him to be the sexton or some one else in charge of the building, and he hid behind the door, where the light was going on below. As his men passed with him to await his orders he felt for a sudden moment the solemn stillness of the place and its character, but the silence was quickly interrupted by a beating on the door of the room in which the fugitives had taken refuge, and he knew that they were breaking loopholes for their rifles. At the sound his passion, which had died for an instant, flamed up again, and he hastily drew his men to a farther corner where the rifle barrels, even when thrust through the holes in the door, could not secure their range. Then while he whispered with Evans and the two tried to decide what would be best to do in the doubtful situation the curious silence which had in it so much that was solemn and impressive fell again over the place.

The defenders had broken the holes in the door and were motionless and silent, awaiting the advance of their assailants, who still stood in their corner hesitating. Only faint gleams of light came through the panes, but the eyes of the soldiers became accustomed to the dusk. The gray-haired little man had ceased his efforts to open the window and stood with his back to it, his face expressing his fright and terror at what had happened and what was about to happen.

Fleming heard the ticking of a clock somewhere over his head, but he did not look up to see. In his indecision his eyes wandered to the civilian, and he was amused at the old man's fright. But,

"STOP!" said the old man in a firm voice, then he had no business there and must take his chances. The fight could not pause for him. Yet the wrinkled face and the pinched features attracted and held Fleming's eyes, and he wondered in a vague way what the man would do—whether he would crouch again in the corner or make another effort to escape by the window. The man's eyes met his own and stared into them with a gaze that seemed to the young lieutenant to be full of reproach and upbraiding.

Fleming could not account for the influence of this stranger, and the sudden

strength of the gaze that met his own and held him back from his purpose, for the figure of the old man was not commanding, and his fright was obvious. He was about to order him down the stairs, but at that moment the civilian raised himself up, and his eyes grew bolder.

"Fleming with the quickness of intuition saw that this old man whom he had despised felt one of those sudden inspirations of courage which sometimes come even to cowards. He saw the expansion of the figure, the brightening of the eye, the look that was prophetic, and again he paused as he was about to give a command.

"Stop!" said the old man in a firm voice, raising his hand and pointing an accusing forefinger at Fleming.

The lieutenant hesitated and looked at him in wonder.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Stop, I say!" repeated the old man. Fleming laughed and with contempt. He had thrown off the momentary influence of the accusing look, and his mind returned with full force to his original purpose, the destruction of the rebels who had entrenched themselves in the room.

"Out of the way!" he exclaimed angrily. "We're going to storm that room in there, and we will not be responsible for stray bullets."

The old man did not shrink back at the officer's emphatic command. His eyes



FLEMING AND EVANS SALUTED THEM WITH MILITARY COURTESY.

were shining with a feverish excitement and his courage seemed to grow as the fever rose.

"Stop, I tell you again!" he shouted. "This is murder that you and those in that room, too, are bent upon!"

"It is not war! The battle is over, and you fight here without purpose! What is the possession of this church to either of you? And to fight, too, at such a time!"

Fleming looked scornfully at the old man who yet held his attention and impeded him.

"At such a time?" he repeated. "It's true that it's night, and the snow is falling, but we're not parlor soldiers to seek our tents because of a winter night."

"It's more than a winter night," said the old man sternly, raising his accusing finger again and pointing it at Fleming. "Listen!"

The unseen clock overhead began to strike, and Fleming and his men, awed despite themselves by the old man's manner, counted the strokes under their breath. One, two, three, they counted, and on up to 12, standing in silence and making no movement, as if some new power possessed them. Nor did any sound come from the room in which their enemies lay, and Fleming believed that they, too, had been listening to the old man's words. Then he grew angry at himself and sought to shake off the spell.

"Did you hear that?" asked the old man.

"Yes, I heard it," said Fleming, "and I heard nothing but a clock striking midnight."

"But what a midnight!" exclaimed the old man. "And do you not know what morning has begun?"

Without waiting for an answer, he seized a rope which hung by the wall and as he pulled with strength and practiced hand a bell far above them began to ring. Its mellow note, steady and strong, echoed through the night, which heard no other sound now, and rose and fell in a song of joy. Listening to its music, Fleming forgot for a moment the wildness of the winter night and the lust of battle which had burned so fiercely in his veins.

"Listen, listen, I tell you!" exclaimed the old man, his face transfigured by the ecstasy which possessed him. "Is not this a better sound than the crack of rifles and the groans of dying men? Again, I ask

you do you not know what morning has begun?"

"How should I know?" asked Fleming. "How can any man who has been marching and fighting and skirmishing for weeks keep track of time?"

"This is the night of the 24th of December, and it's Christmas morning now," cried the old man, "the night when Christ was born and came into the world to preach forgiveness and to teach men to love one another! I've rung that morning in with this bell every year for the last 50 years, and I came here tonight to do it again, though you've followed me and fought in the church itself. Stand back, I tell you! You shall not fight here with the bells of Christmas morning ringing in your ears—God would strike you dead for it."

It seemed to Fleming that the man's manner now had the dignity and force that we ascribe to the Hebrew prophets of old. His littleness had disappeared, he showed no semblance of fear, and his eyes blazed with the force of the spirit that was in him.

The notes of the bell rose far above the whistle of the wind, and even in the presence of those who carried arms in their hands to kill told of peace on earth and good will to men. The sanguinary scenes of the night passed out of Fleming's mind for a moment, and in their place he saw the peaceful Christmas morning of his childhood. Then he looked weakly at Evans, as if he would seek counsel from his second in command.

"Lower your weapons!" cried the old man, who never ceased his ringing. "I tell you again that God will strike you dead if you fight in his house at such a time. What a sacrifice, and you but boys!"

The fever in Fleming's veins was dying. He looked at his men and saw that the heat of combat was passing from them. In his ears rang the joyful note of the bell which the Christmas morning of his childhood. He turned his eyes from his men to those of the sexton, who pulled the rope with regular and rhythmic stroke, and they fell before the gaze of the old man.

"If I did not have the most southerly Christmas, but he certainly the hottest," remarked William Pender McLean, once editor of the Hongkong Telegraph, but now a Gothamite. "It was at Port Darwin, in Australia, which, next to the Mohave desert, is probably the hottest spot on earth. December there is equivalent to June in the States, and every one of our Christmas is that of our Fourth of July."

"On account of that frightful scourge, the white ant, timber cannot be used in house construction, so that the roofs are made of iron girders and corrugated sheet iron galvanized. This makes a house a veritable oven. The thermometer was well over the 100 mark, and every one in our party was a picture of perspiration and discomfort. But we were determined to celebrate Christmas in good old-fashioned style."

"We had a Christmas tree, wreaths and evergreens, and some one hung up a bunch of what he called mistletoe. Luckily we had an ice factory there, and so secured small blocks of comfort at 4 or 5 cents a pound. Every drink, excepting the punch, was iced, and every food, excepting the turkey and plum pudding, was cold."

"One poetic youth shook a belt of sleigh bells to arouse the imagination and another read aloud Dickens' immortal Christmas carol. We tried to picture the nipping cold enjoyed by Scrooge and Marley's ghost, but the effort proved futile. Yet the awful heat could not weaken the Christmas spirit, and both dinner and day were a delight."

"The oldest Christmas of my experience," observed Dr. Edward Bedloe, United States consul at Canton, China, "was in 1892, while crossing the Pacific ocean to San Francisco. On the evening of Christmas day we reached the one hundred and eightieth degree

Santa Claus seemed upset. He stood off, put his hands in his pockets and gazed in puzzled despair at the row of long limp stockings. Here was a sticker. He went up to the door, turned it inside out, inspected it, twisted it, counted its checks and again stood off and looked at it in an agony of despairing uncertainty. "Well, I'll be blowed," said Santa, "if in these days of bicycling, I can tell which is a man's and which is a woman's." Then a sudden smile wreathed round his troubled face. "But I guess a 49 cent bicycle lamp will do in either case!"

The Deception of Song.  
He gaily rhymed of mistletoe  
And rapt lips so long, you know;  
He'd rather like to see  
Just what 'twas in reality.

He tried, and that young doubting  
Thomas  
Was straightway sued for breach of promise.

Oh, yes, he still writes little rhymes,  
But now of snow and Christmas chimes!  
He pipes his sweet Perian lute  
To pay that breach of promise suit!

## BENEATH THE MISTLETOE

The winter day is dull and gray;  
The vagrant snowflake flies;  
Within, the scene is gay and green  
And bright as summer skies,  
Lips blazes wrap the mossy log,  
That sputters soft and low,  
And dithely Love coos like a dove  
Beneath the mistletoe.

Beneath the mistletoe, Mary,  
Beneath the mistletoe;  
You make a bright Arabian night  
Beneath the mistletoe.

Misspoken Care skulks in despair;  
His shape nowhere is seen;  
Joy leads away the dance with grace  
To music sharp and keen,  
While faces bright, enwreathed in smiles,  
About the fireside glow.

Time flies, mirth-stoled, on wings of gold  
Beneath the mistletoe,  
Beneath the mistletoe, Mary,  
Beneath the mistletoe;  
I wonder how I'll catch you now  
Beneath the mistletoe.

Now Christmas rhymes and Christmas chimes  
Send forth their Christmas cheer,  
While Christmas joys and Christmas toys  
In merry hosts appear.  
The earth is Love's own bow today,  
With good will all aglow;  
By Love's wing fanned, 'tis fairyland  
Beneath the mistletoe.

Beneath the mistletoe, Mary,  
Beneath the mistletoe;  
Love's nest is here with you, my dear,  
Beneath the mistletoe.

R. K. MUNKITTRICK.

# CHRISTMAS AROUND THE WORLD

BY  
**WILLIAM E. S. FALES.**

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It was at a pleasant dinner party at a famous New York hotel, when the conversation turned to the approaching Christmas. The guests were of various callings, but all were qualified to join the Travelers' club, having visited at least three continents.

"What was the oddest Christmas you ever spent?" asked one at a pause in the general chat.

"I certainly can claim the most northerly one," said Captain Leonard Smith, formerly of New Bedford. "It was when I was whaling in the arctic seas and my ship was icebound in the pack about 100 miles north of Alaska. It was a beautiful day, clear, quiet and intensely cold. The stars looked like sharp points, the moon like a clean cut silver disk and the heavens as black as sin. Scientifically it was day, but as a matter of fact it was pure midnight. Our bill of fare was wonderful. We had a fine punch, tea and coffee. Our meats were corned beef, corned pork, and, best of all, some polar bear meat and seal blubber. I will not recommend seal blubber for these latitudes, but in the far north, after many months on salt horse and canned goods, it's as delicious as anything I ever ate. We had potatoes, carrots, yellow turnips and gingerbread pudding with real raisins in it. There wasn't a dish any one here would look at at the present moment, but all on board vowed it was the finest banquet they could recall."

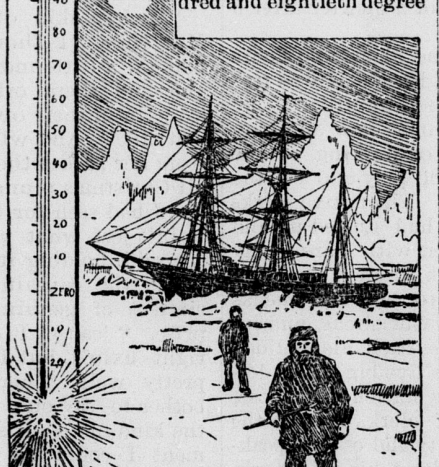
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THE OLDEST CHRISTMAS, of west longitude, where there is no time. Here when a ship is going west an entire day is dropped from the calendar, so that you go from Wednesday night and wake up Friday morning. In going east, you reverse the process and repeat the day.

"By extraordinary luck this happened to me, as I said, on Christmas, so that I had two Christmas days the same year. The captain of our good Pacific Mail steamer told us that the event had never happened before in the history of the company and to the best of his knowledge had never happened before to any craft. If that be true, the 60 passengers and 150 crew may well boast of their experience."

"But two consecutive Christmas days are not a success. The dinner of the second day seems insipid by contrast with that of the first, and the merriment of the latter is succeeded by weariness on the former. It is a curious place, that one hundred and eightieth degree of longitude. It has a climate with grammar and tones. According to the way you are going you can say truthfully: 'Tomorrow is today and today was yesterday. Today was yesterday and tomorrow will be today. Tomorrow has no yesterday, and yesterday has no tomorrow.' Thoughts like these confound the brain, but the wettest Christmas," cheerily voiced Walter Hutchinson, the traveling agent of a great Liverpool house. "It was in the Malay country near Singapore. The climate there was wittily summed up by the great government of Sir Stamford Raffles as consisting of 'two seasons, the wet and the dry. In the latter it rains every 15 minutes; in the former all the time.' Christmas eve it was shower, shower, shower. During the night it poured. Christmas morning the landscape was like a mermaid's paradise. The road was a line of unbroken water, the river not far away seemed a moving deluge, the fields were sheets of water, broken by bushes and trees in mathematical patterns and the uncultivated land was an overflowed marsh.

"The air was full of warm steam, and

you could almost feel the vegetation growing. The table linen and clothing were damp. The water condensed on furniture and trickled in little streams down the walls. If a boat had sailed into the drawing room, it would have caused no surprise. My host had a blazing fire in his fireplace, a poor imitation of the real article, but it cast a ruddy glow in the room, and, what was better still, made a pleasant draft. We did not think of snow or ice or any other form of water. We had too much of it around us everywhere."

"My oddest Christmas was in Egypt," told the writer. "I was the guest of a dear friend, Dr. James F. Love, pasha, who was attached to the khedive's staff. His home was a palace similar in architecture to those in Italian cities, but colored in Arab suggestions. Within it was truly oriental. Inlaid and gilded furniture, relics of Pharaohs, Ptolemies, Phoenicians and Roman emperors, weapons of Sarcophagi, Bedouins and Sudanese, Persian and Af-



THE HOTTEST CHRISTMAS, brown rugs, lion and tiger skins, and the weather of the hottest, remarked William Pender McLean, once editor of the Hongkong Telegraph, but now a Gothamite. "It was at Port Darwin, in Australia, which, next to the Mohave desert, is probably the hottest spot on earth. December there is equivalent to June in the States, and every one of our Christmas is that of our Fourth of July."

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"Woodman, Spare That Tree!" "Don't you think dear," said Mrs. Firkins, "that it is time we were seeing about getting the Christmas tree for the children?" "No, my dear, I don't," said Mr. Firkins, with great sternness. "We've got to stop that sort of thing."

"Because I've been looking into the matter," returned Mr. Firkins, "and I have become impressed with the necessity for the preservation of our forests. It's a very grave matter, my dear; very grave indeed! No patriotic citizen can afford to be inattentive to the reckless cutting of pine and hemlock. And I'm not going to help ruin our forests for any old Christmas superstition!"

Then he went down town and spent \$5 for a box of Christmas cigars for himself.

For the Sake of Self Protection. When Mr. Nuwed rushed into his favorite cigar store, the perspiration was rolling down his face, and he looked excited. "Quick, Charlie!" he said to the young man behind the counter. "Get out a box of Cuba Superbas for me! My wife will be in here in five minutes to buy me a box of cigars, and she'll try to buy 'em for 59 cents. Here's \$5. Sell her those Superbas for the 59 cents, old man, and save my life."

And as Mrs. Nuwed stepped timidly in her affectionate but precautionary spouse stepped out the back way.



HER TASK. That holidays make folk idle. I don't believe it. Each maiden mends her stockings on Christmas Eve.